

# Spanish Wine Guide



# Introduction

## Previewing this book?

Please check out our [enhanced preview](#), which offers a deeper look at this guidebook.

Wine guides for the ultra curious, Approach Guides take an in-depth look at a wine region's grapes, appellations and vintages to help you discover wines that meet your preferences.

With this guide, we explore perhaps the most dynamic wine-producing country in world, Spain: from the complex garnachas of Priorat, to the enticing verdejos of Rueda, to the enigmatic sherries of Jerez. In addition to being great values, the wines of Spain are exciting, as they are based on many little-known indigenous varieties. Equally valuable as a travel guide and wine shop companion, this Approach Guide is designed as a quick-reference resource for wine enthusiasts seeking to understand what makes Spain's wines unique and make informed choices.

## What's in this guidebook

- **Grape varieties.** We describe Spain's primary red and white grape varieties and where they reach their highest expressions.
- **Vintage ratings.** We offer a straightforward vintage ratings table, which affords high-level insight into the best and most challenging years for wine production in Spain.
- **Denomination profiles.** We provide detailed profiles of each of Spain's denominations. For each denomination, this guide describes the prevailing *terroir*, the types of wine produced and what makes them distinctive.
- **Recommendations.** We mark our favorite denominations with asterisks (\*) — our selections have a record for providing quality, consistency and good values.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and links are provided to the best online resources.

## Contact us anytime

Our readers are our greatest inspiration. Email us at [founders@approachguides.com](mailto:founders@approachguides.com) to let us know about your experience with Approach Guides — many of our recent updates have been inspired by customers like you. We personally respond to every email.

We hope you enjoy what we believe is a totally unique guide to the wines of Spain.



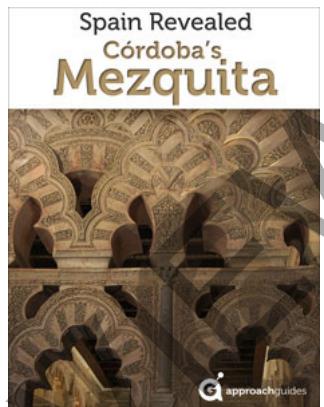
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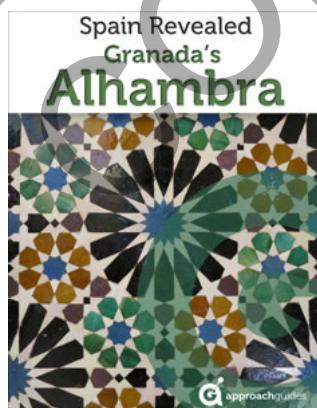
We have also designed this guide as a wine app for the iPhone or iPad ([www.agwine.com](http://www.agwine.com)).

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Granada, the last stronghold of Islam in Spain, is home to one of Spain's greatest Islamic sites: the 14th century Alhambra. [Download our guide to the Alhambra](#) to explore its rich decoration and stunning architecture.



# Spanish Wine Guide

**Version 2.0**

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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Approach Guides  
New York, NY  
[www.approachguides.com](http://www.approachguides.com)

ISBN: 978-1-936614-45-5

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Abona

Alella

Alicante \*

Almansa \*

Arabako Txakolina

Arlanza

Arribes

Bierzo \*

Binissalem \*

Bizkaiko Txakolina

Bullas

Calatayud

Campo de Borja

Cariñena \*

Cava \*

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Cigales  
Conca de Barberà  
Condado de Huelva  
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El Hierro  
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Gran Canaria  
Jerez (Sherry) \*  
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Navarra  
Penedès  
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Pla i Llevant de Mallorca  
Priorat \*  
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Ribeira Sacra

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Ribeiro \*

Ribera del Duero \*

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Rioja Alavesa

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Rueda \*

Somontano

Tacoronte-Acentejo \*

Tarragona

Terra Alta

Tierra de León

Toro \*

Uclés

Utiel-Requena

Valdeorras \*

Valdepeñas \*

Valencia

Valle de Güímar

Valle de la Orotava

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Ycoden-Daute-Isora \*

Yecla

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# How to Use This Wine Guide

This is a very different kind of wine guide. It leverages the strengths of the digital medium to make understanding Spain's wines easier and more intuitive.

## What's Inside

- **A framework.** We emphasize the fundamental themes that are key to understanding Spain and its wines.
- **Everything in context.** We place the wines of each wine-producing denomination into context by comparing them to regional benchmarks and neighboring denominations.
- **Strategy and recommendations.** We provide a strategy for choosing wines in each denomination, giving particular consideration to those that offer the best values. Our recommended denominations and grape varieties are marked with asterisks (\*).

## How It's Organized

- **Highlighted information.** The guidebook uses bullet points to organize information and bold text to highlight key points; this makes it easier for you to isolate what is most important.
- **Simplified navigation.** We have designed the table of contents so that you can quickly jump around to find what you are looking for. Further, you do not have to read in linear manner, start to finish, since we ensure that key points are included in each denomination profile.
- **Quick search.** We encourage you to use the search feature to find exactly what you are looking for, whether it is a specific grape, a flavor, or a soil type.

**Author Tip:** To see all of the denominations associated with a specific region, use the search function. Simply search “Region: Catalunya” or any other region and the app will filter the book for you. It’s easy!

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# Red Grape Varieties

## **Bobal \***

Long used as a blending grape to give structure and color, bobal is now being used as the base to create interesting reds and rosés. The indigenous thick-skinned, late-ripening bobal prefers Spain's warm climates. It yields medium-bodied wines with abundant flavors of wild berries, violets and chocolate; they typically have high acidity. Further, due to high anthocyanins in the thick skins, they are dark in color and high in tannins.

Bobal-based wines are often blended with tempranillo and garnacha to add aromatic complexity and body. Look for them in Valencia's Utiel-Requena DO and Castilla-La Mancha's Manchuela and Ribera del Júcar DOs.

## **Caíño**

Grown in Galicia, the rare caíño is a similarly thick-skinned variety. It produces dark, highly aromatic wines with medium weight, high acidity and a strong earthy, mineral streak, usually with black pepper highlights. They are typically made for immediate consumption in a light, fresh unoaked style. Look to the Rías Baixas and Ribeiro DOs for quality production.

## **Callet**

Native to Mallorca in the Balearic Islands, callet delivers fresh wines with low alcohol, dark color, raspberry fruit, soft tannins and a distinctive spicy, herbal character. To smooth out its otherwise rough edges, it is usually blended with cabernet sauvignon, manto negro, or tempranillo.

## **Cariñena**

Known as carignan in France, cariñena (aka mazuelo and samsó) thrives in warm climates, which are required to bring this late-ripening variety to maturity. It is best known for being a small contributor to the great garnacha-based wines of Catalunya's Priorat and Montsant DOs; in its supporting role, cariñena adds good acidity, dark coloration and a boost of tannins, coupled with bright, unmistakable blueberry and violet notes. That said, while its traditional role has been as a blending grape, it is just starting to be used on its own to make respectable single-varietal wines.

## **Garnacha \***

Garnacha — known elsewhere as grenache — produces excellent results in Spain. This thin-skinned

grape prefers warm climates and yields big wines with intense flavors of dark fruit (especially blackberries, raspberries and plums), violets, pepper and spice. While tannins and acidity skew to the low side, alcohol levels tend to be high.

- For the best that garnacha has to offer, look to Catalunya's Priorat and Montsant DOs, where old vines prevail and the *terroir* is ideally suited to the variety.
- Aragón is home to high quality versions at extremely attractive prices. With values in mind, seek out old-vine versions in the Cariñena, Calatayud and Campo de Borja DOs.
- There are also good values made from old vines in Castilla-La Mancha's Méntrida DO.

Finally, if you are looking for a lighter, crisper option, the grape is used throughout Spain to produce dry, full-bodied rosés.

## Garnacha Tintorera

Not to be confused with highly-regarded garnacha, garnacha tintorera (aka alicante bouschet), interestingly, is one of the few grape varieties that has colored juice; this quality naturally made it attractive for giving color to bulk wines. But times are changing and garnacha tintorera is beginning to be used for single-varietal wines.

Castilla-La Mancha's Almansa DO is the best denomination from which to try the much-maligned garnacha tintorera. At its best, the grape yields wines of great depth and richness of flavor: pepper, smoke, cranberries, sour cherries, green peppers and minerals, with a nice dose of acidity. Often great values, they need to breathe a little. Give them time to open up and the rewards will be immense.

## Graciano \*

Graciano, grown chiefly in the La Rioja region, has historically been used as a blending grape to enhance the color, aromas and acidity of tempranillo-based wines. However, like many other varieties in Spain, the heat-loving, late-ripening graciano is beginning to be cultivated for single-varietal wines and the early results are encouraging.

Single-varietal wines are typically dark, full bodied and intensely aromatic. They deliver flavors of blueberries, dates and dark (sometimes candied) fruit, with good acidity and ample tannins.

## Hondarribi Beltza

The País Vasco's thick-skinned hondarribi beltza is used to make txakoli (pronounced 'choc-o-lee') reds. The grape yields mid-weight wines with high acidity, ample fruit and bitter herb notes. Although there are certainly exceptions, wines can lack balance and polish; accordingly, we do not recommend wines based on this variety overall. That said, hondarribi beltza is used to make tasty rosés.

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# White Grape Varieties

## Airén

Airén is Spain's (and the world's) most widely-planted grape in terms of vineyard planted area, due mainly to the unusually low vine density of the high elevation vineyards in Castilla-La Mancha. Faring well in the region's exceptionally hot and dry summer growing conditions, it is principally cultivated for use in undistinguished bulk wines and as the base for the ubiquitous Brandy de Jerez.

However, given the proper treatment to minimize oxidation — cold fermentation in stainless steel tanks and machine harvesting at night — the thick-skinned, very late-maturing airén can yield pale yellow wines of a generally pleasing character: carrying just-sufficient acidity, they have mild aromas and light tropical fruit (banana, melon, pineapple), almond and anise flavors.

## Albarín

Likely related to the more famous albariño, the rare albarín yields wines with grapefruit, ripe lime, orange, melon and fig flavors; perhaps slightly more aromatic than those based on albariño, they typically have a herbaceous streak, good minerality and pronounced acidity.

The early-ripening grape suffers from overproduction and quality levels are not consistently high. That said, albarín has recently begun to be grown to a high standard of quality for single-varietal wines in Castilla y León's Tierra de León DO.

## Albariño \*

Indigenous to Galicia, the thick-skinned, typically early-ripening albariño is one of Spain's star white varieties. Wines based on albariño have abundant fruit (peaches, apricots), generous mouth-feel and strong saline and floral notes; acidity levels are high, but not so much that they impact the lingering finish. Although it fares well with barrel fermentation and aging, albariño is typically fermented in stainless steel and released immediately to showcase the wine's bright, clean fruit character.

The best albariño-based wines are from Galicia, Spain's coolest and wettest region; the grape is ideally suited to these conditions, as its thick skins protect it from fungal disease that could pose an issue for a more delicate variety. Rías Baixas is albariño's heartland, but Ribeira Sacra also produces nice versions. While the variety is also grown in Portugal, it takes on a bit more fruit-forward, expressive and acidic character in Galicia.

Albariño-based wines are particularly well suited to the local cuisine of Galicia, seafood. Keep in mind, prices on these wines tend toward the higher side, given the low overall production levels and the grape's increasingly favorable reception in international markets.

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# Denominations and Aging

## A Spanish Wine Label

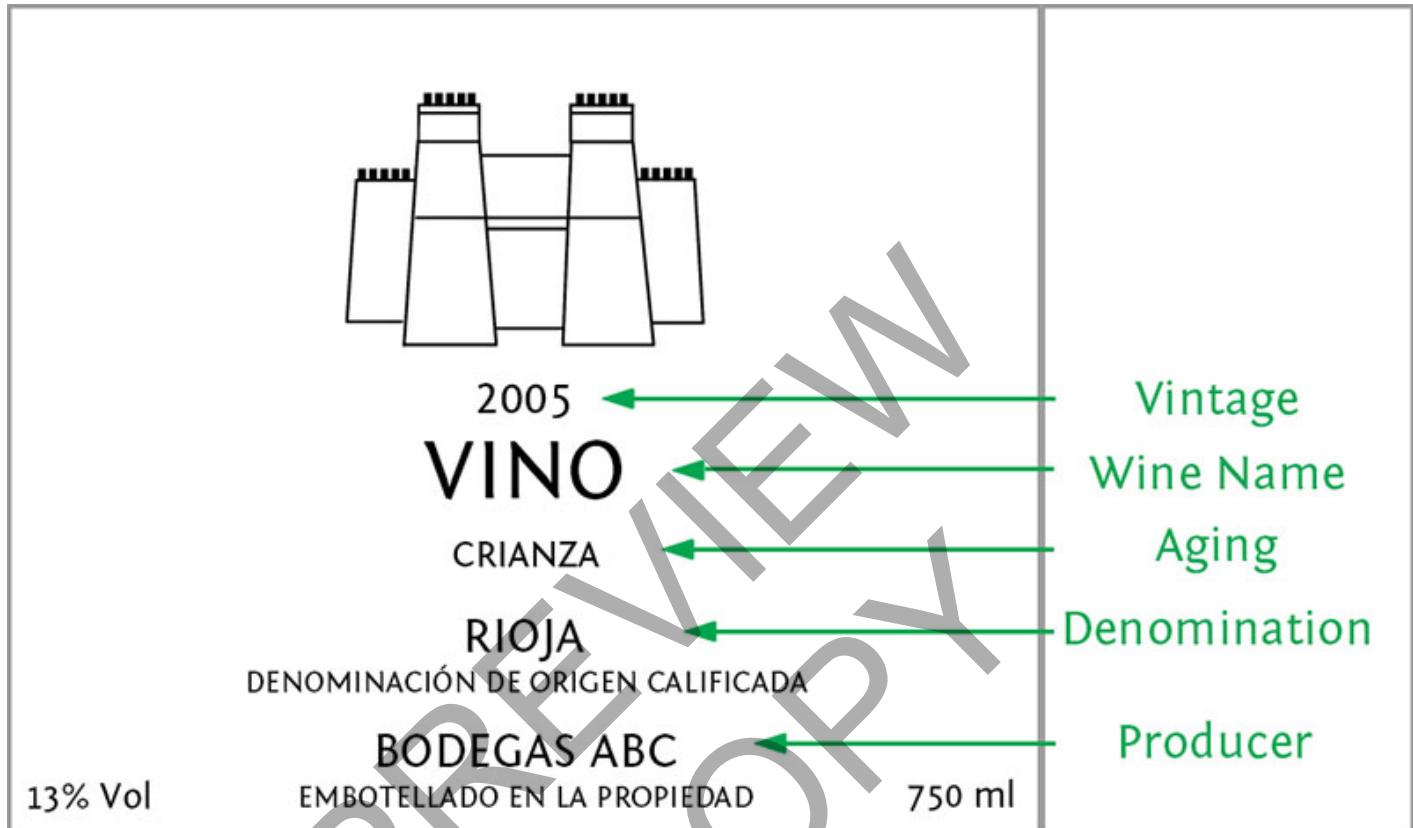


Fig. 1. A Spanish wine label.

A Spanish wine label provides critical information for understanding what to expect before you open the bottle. Most important, labels reveal the wine's vintage, wine name, aging, denomination and producer (green highlights in Fig. 1). The denomination and aging information are a bit more complicated and require some explanation.

## Denomination

Even if you know nothing about a wine's producer, the denomination gives you the first big clue as to what's in the bottle. Put simply, a denomination **identifies the specific geographic location** in which the grapes for a wine were grown. Knowing the denomination in which a wine was produced affords you critical information.

- **Terroir.** Features of each location's physical environment — climate, soil type, altitude and exposure — fundamentally impact the nature of the grapes grown there. In this way, these features, often referred to collectively as *terroir*, have a profound impact on the wines pro-

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# Regional Map



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# Bierzo \*

## Overview

**Region:** Castilla y León.

Created in 1989, Bierzo is located in the far northwestern corner of the region, on the border with Galicia's Valdeorras.

- **Vineyards.** Most of the vineyards are located at 500-600 meters in elevation along the steep slopes of the Sil river and its tributaries.
- **Soils.** Soils are alluvial (with traces of iron) along the river's edge; slate and granite concentrations increase up slope.
- **Climate.** The zone is exposed to the sea, which offers it a significantly cooler climate with more stable intra-day temperatures than other denominations in Castilla y León.

## Red Wines \*

Reds are Bierzo's focus.

- Bierzo is Spain's **premier denomination for mencía**; this is where we recommend you experiment with this up-and-coming variety.
- Bierzo's climate is marginally warmer than the other mencía-growing denominations in neighboring Galicia (Valdeorras and Ribeira Sacra). This, coupled with the mineral-rich soils, generates a stylistic difference: Bierzo's versions are **the richest, fullest-bodied and most fruit-forward versions of mencía available**.

## White Wines

Bierzo has good whites, although they do not yet rival those coming from neighboring Galicia.

- Tasty **godello**-based whites are made in a crisp, full-bodied and fruit-forward style.
- Wines based on **dóna blanca** are also produced.

## More Information

- [Official website](#)
- [Producers](#)

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# Priorat \*

## Overview

**Region:** Catalunya.

Created in 1954, Priorat — named after the 12th century Carthusian Priorato de Scala Dei, the Priory of the Stairway of God, under the auspices of which winemaking began in the region — is one of the highest-esteemed denominations in all of Spain.

- **Vineyards.** Vineyards sit at high altitudes, ranging from 100-800 meters, with the best on steep slopes at the higher end of this range.
- **Climate.** The climate is dry and warm. Although the elevation brings cooler evenings, this is moderated by heat emanating from the soils and the stabilizing influence of the Mediterranean (only 30 kilometers away).

## Soils

There are two soil types in Priorat, each of which produces a different style of wine:

- The denomination is famous for its ***llicorella*** soils: volcanic in origin, they consist chiefly of slate, with small levels of mica; these soils stress the vines and conserve heat for optimal grape ripening, producing big wines with bold fruit and intense flavors, with soft, approachable tannins, even when young; they even impart a mineral edge to the resulting wines. Wines from these soils dominate production.
- At the highest elevations, however, the soils change to **red clay**; the resulting wines are lighter and more delicate, often with intoxicating aromas.

Both soils exist over a **schist foundation**, which provides a porous enough material for vines to penetrate for stored rainwater reserves and minerals.

## Red Wines \*

Red wines are based chiefly on garnacha and cariñena:

- The primary grape in the blend is low-yielding old-vine **garnacha**, which accounts for nearly 40% of vineyard planted area. It produces wines with bold, nuanced fruit, laced with a distinctive mineral (slate) edge. The grape's thin skins impart minimal tannins, so they must be introduced by vinifying with stems or aging in small oak barrels (225 liters).
- The aromatic **cariñena** brings a blueberry, violet nose and dark color.

Although Priorat has gotten a reputation for over-oaking its wines and relying on non-indigenous varieties to enhance the garnacha base, **leading winemakers are increasingly returning to more traditional styles of winemaking** to bring out the best in their prized garnacha: vinifying

in cement tanks; aging in larger barrels; using native yeasts; avoiding destemming; and decreasing the percentage of cabernet sauvignon and syrah in the blend (restoring cariñena to secondary importance).

Overall, they are special wines; although they can lean toward the pricey side, they are worth it for a splurge.

## White Wines

Although reds are clearly its focus, Priorat does produce a small amount (under 5% of total production) of high quality white wines based on two traditional Catalunyan varieties: garnacha blanca and macabeo.

## More Information

- [Official website](#)
- [Producers](#)

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## Spain Reading List

We've re-imagined the travel reading list for those seeking more rewarding and fulfilling experiences around the world. [Explore our collection](#) of "Trip Reads" — expertly-curated print books, ebooks, magazine articles, papers from leading academics, online resources, music, podcasts, videos and more.

Here are just a few of our Spain recommendations ([see the complete list](#)):

- **Late Dinner: Discovering the Food of Spain** Of the many books on Spanish cuisines, this is the best for the traveler. *By Paul Richardson.*
- **"Sharing a Sherry Treasured in Spain"** Visiting three bodegas in search of the mysterious, elusive palo cortado. *By Geoffrey Gray.*
- **The Sounds of Flamenco** Listen to a playlist containing a personal collection of Andalucia's signature music, flamenco, compiled by our founder Jennifer Raezer. The perfect pre-trip soundtrack.
- **My 1st Spanish Word Book** Just for kids! A bilingual word book that presents pictures labeled in both Spanish and English. *By Angela Wilkes.*

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**Los Angeles Times**

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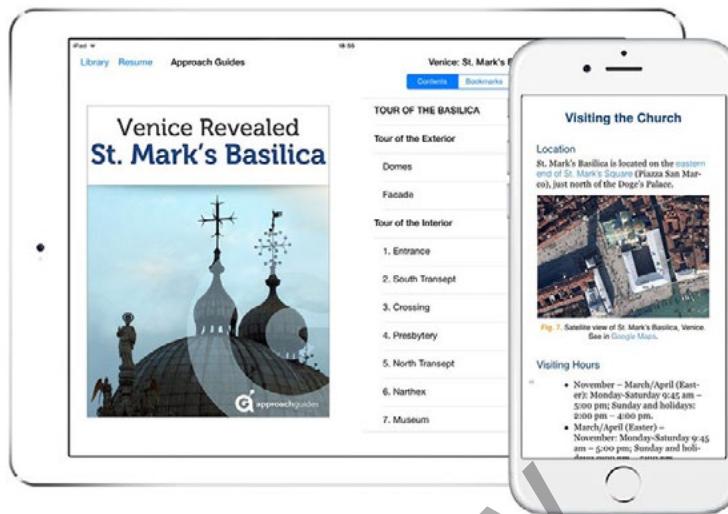
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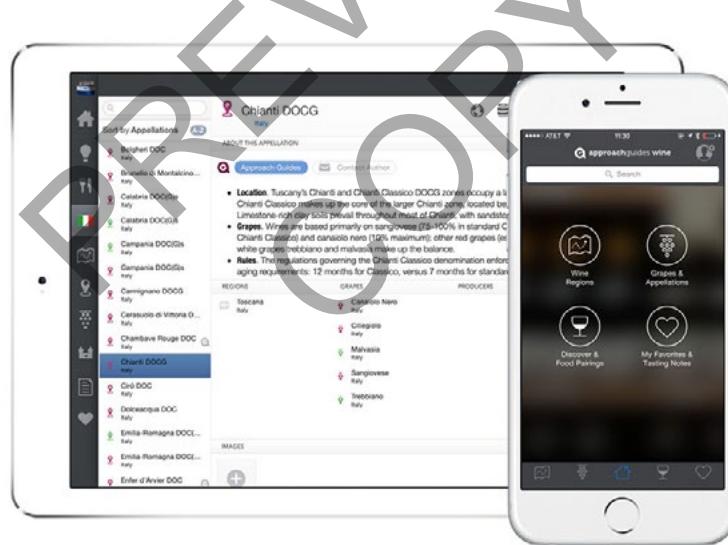
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